
PROPOSAL FOR NATIVE FISH RESTORATION IN THE BLUE RIVER DRAINAGE APACHE-SITGREAVES NATIONAL FORESTS

Introduction

The Bureau of Reclamation and Forest Service, working in cooperation with the Arizona Game and Fish Department and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, are preparing an Environmental Assessment on a proposal to enhance the native coldwater and warmwater fisheries in the Blue River drainage of eastern Arizona. The proposal would eliminate nonnative predatory fish from 5 tributary streams of the upper drainage and protect native fishes in the mainstem Blue River. The purpose of this scoping report is to inform interested and affected parties of the joint Bureau of Reclamation-Forest Service proposal and to solicit comments on the proposal.

Background

Introduction and proliferation of nonnative fishes has been repeatedly documented as one of the most pervasive threats to the status of native fish communities in the southwestern United States. Spread of nonnative fishes into southwestern freshwater ecosystems has historically resulted in the reduction or elimination of native fish populations due to predation, competition, hybridization, and other factors.

In 2001, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a revised Biological Opinion on the transportation and delivery of Central Arizona Project water to the Gila River basin and its potential to introduce and spread nonnative aquatic species. The Biological Opinion addressed the possible serious and adverse effects of the Central Arizona Project on several species of listed native Arizona fishes. Conservation measures in the Opinion direct the Bureau

of Reclamation to construct a fish barrier in the Blue River, and provide funding for native fish recovery and protection in the Gila River basin.

Section 7(a)(1) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) directs Federal agencies to utilize their authorities to implement programs for the conservation of threatened and endangered species. Forest Service policy is to recover threatened and endangered species so that special protection measures provided under the ESA are no longer necessary, and to ensure, through development and implementation of appropriate management practices, that nonlisted species do not become threatened or endangered because of Forest Service actions (FSM 2602, 2670). Policy also is to encourage or initiate the reintroduction of listed species onto suitable unoccupied habitat when such actions promote recovery of the species (FSM 2674). The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires the Forest Service to provide for the biological diversity of national forests consistent with overall multiple-use objectives of the planning area and to maintain viable populations in the planning area. The Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Plan (Forest Service 1987, as amended) have goals, objectives, standards, and guidelines for maintaining viable populations of native fishes, and for recovering federally listed species.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the proposed action is for restoration and protection of the native fish assemblage in the mainstem Blue River and 5 tributary streams. Action regarding the proposed native fish restoration effort is needed because:

- the 2001 Biological Opinion on the delivery of Central Arizona Project water to the Gila River basin directs the Bureau of Reclamation to construct a fish barrier in the Blue River to shelter federally-protected fishes;
- the Blue River represents a high priority stream for protection of an existing population of threatened loach minnow, and potential reintroduction of spikedace and other native warmwater fishes;
- improved status for recovery of the endangered Gila trout would be achieved through reintroduction of this species in suitable headwater tributaries; and
- Forest Plan direction calls for maintaining viable populations of native fish, recovering federally listed species, and improving habitat for native fish.

Proposed Action

Gila Trout Reintroduction. The Forest Service proposes to establish self-sustaining populations of native Gila trout in 5 headwater tributaries of the Blue River (see map). Gila trout were once widespread in the cold water streams of the upper Gila River basin but have disappeared from a large portion of their former range. The proposed Gila trout recovery effort involves the following activities:

- construct fish barriers in Lanphier Canyon, Grant, and McKittrick creeks; remove nonnative fishes from the upper reaches of these streams with a piscicide (antimycin A or rotenone);
- remove nonnative fishes from reaches above existing natural barriers in Coleman and KP creeks with a piscicide (antimycin A or rotenone); and
- stock renovated segments of each stream with Gila trout and other appropriate native fishes.

Native warmwater fishes. The Bureau of Reclamation proposes to construct a fish barrier on the lower Blue River near the San Francisco River confluence. This effort would be a key element in the long-term protection of the native fishery by preventing future upstream migration of nonnative fishes from the San Francisco River. Warmwater fishes of the Blue River system historically included longfin dace, loach minnow, speckled dace, desert sucker, and Sonora sucker. Loach minnow is federally listed as a threatened species. Razorback sucker, a federally-listed endangered species, was stocked into the Blue River by the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

The Blue River and its tributaries are considered within historic range of several additional native fishes, and they are proposed to be repatriated to the system. These include spikedace, a federally-listed threatened species, Gila chub, a proposed endangered species, and roundtail chub, a species that has been petitioned for federal listing and is also a State-designated sportfish.

Alternative Actions

Other alternatives that will be evaluated include construction of fish barriers in tributary streams without chemical treatments and fishery management options without barriers.

Environmental Assessment

To comply with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA), the Bureau of Reclamation and Forest Service have determined that an Environmental Assessment needs to be prepared to evaluate the significance of environmental impacts that could result from implementation of the proposal.

NEPA applies only to Federal actions; therefore, the first step in determining the scope of the Environmental Assessment is

identification of significant issues related to the effect of the proposed Federal action on the existing environment. Public input during this initial scoping process will help us focus the NEPA document on relevant issues.

We anticipate the following issues will be addressed in the Environmental Assessment:

- effects to biological resources, including special status and non-target species;
- effects to cultural resources;
- effects to water quality;
- effects to primitive areas;
- effects to potential Wild and Scenic River designation of Blue River;
- effects to recreation; and
- effects to public safety and health

Decisions to be Made

The Bureau of Reclamation and the Forest Service are the co-lead Federal agencies responsible for preparing the Environmental Assessment. Reclamation would construct the fish barrier on the Blue River. The Forest Service would implement Gila trout recovery efforts in 5 upper Blue River tributaries. Both agencies must decide whether to implement the proposed action described above, modify the proposed action, or take no action. Under the no action alternative, there would be no effort undertaken by the Federal agencies to enhance the native fishery of the Blue River.

Public Input Needed

Reclamation and the Forest Service would like to give the interested public an opportunity to comment on the proposed action. The agencies will then identify significant issues and mitigation related to the action that should be addressed in the Environmental Assessment.

For more information, please contact Mr. John McGlothlen at the Bureau of Reclamation, (602) 216-3866 (or by e-mail, jwmcglathlen@lc.usbr.gov).

Written comments must be submitted to the following address:

Bureau of Reclamation
Phoenix Area Office
PXAO-1500 (McGlothlen)
PO Box 81169
Phoenix, AZ 85069-1169

Fax comments to 602-216-4006, Attention: John McGlothlen

Note: Because of recent changes in Forest Service appeal regulations (36 CFR 215), comments submitted during Scoping no longer provide appeal eligibility. If you wish to be eligible to appeal this project, you must submit substantive comments during the 30-day comment period following release of the draft Environmental Assessment (36 CFR 215.13). If you wish to receive a copy of the draft Environmental Assessment, please send us a note requesting to be placed on the mailing list.

**U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
Lower Colorado Region
Phoenix Area Office**



**U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Southwestern Region
Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests**

